

*Humanitas: A Commentary**

Jerry Zaslove

This edition of *Humanitas* introduces the new bulletin of the Institute for the Humanities. It follows upon several previous newsletters, which also featured reports from events that we have programmed. *Humanitas* reviews many of our programs that open the humanities to various communities of scholars, organizations, and citizens.

This edition of the bulletin celebrates the many years of co-operation with the J.S. Woodsworth Chair in the Humanities, the Humanities Department—a vibrant addition to Simon Fraser’s Faculty of Arts—and the many community groups and individuals who have participated in Institute programs, and who have provided inspiration and critical response to our activities.

Simon Fraser’s Institute for the Humanities is unique in Canada because we are connected to an academic department and an endowed chair, which gives us a mandate that allows us freedom to explore many different ways to work with social and cultural organizations and individuals. When we began in 1983 there was only one similar institute in Canada. Now there are several. At that time, many American universities began to develop institutes and centers for the humanities. Some have been inspired by new orientations to social and cultural criticism; some are heavily endowed. Most exist at the crossroads of departments and faculties—often taking on Hermes-like poses in order to tease out new critical positions and ideas. Like us, they are inspired by the need to define cultural and intellectual problems in new ways, or to search for new shelters for thought, or to provoke universities to examine themselves and take action on critical social issues. Some are fashionable, some not. Universities have announced their desire to find new ways to develop

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public participation and enlarge public discourse in times when the public can have a jaundiced eye about universities that are trying to be all things to all people. Our Institute has a unique mandate in this regard: to support initiatives and develop and reinforce programs in human rights and social justice, peace studies, community education, and the arts in society. Easy words to write, difficult to sustain!

However, it is clear that universities are at a socio-economic crossroads—perhaps they always have been. But the times have changed in my own 35 years at Simon Fraser. The crossroads of intellectual work and research interests intersect wider avenues and the traffic is more congested. The struggle for new intellectual programs is sometimes against, sometimes in accord with older departments and disciplines. This is an old story: the new story is that universities today must take stock of the formidable new demands from the public, industry, governments and research bureaucracies or they will be labelled as obsolete, delinquent, parasites. We hear cries for new forms of competence, and new problem-solving techniques push older forms of knowledge to the edge of extinction—witness the elimination of departments at many universities, including Simon Fraser and the University of British Columbia. Senior administrators must be all things to all kinds of people—knowledge brokers, fund-raisers, anti-bureaucratic bureaucrats as well as academics and financial soothsayers. Students pay a heavy price for being at a university that may itself not see what it is. Since 1965 when I arrived at Simon Fraser University, a small university has gone through a rite of passage that tested its legitimacy as an academic institution that could go fifteen rounds with the heavyweight Canadian universities. It seems to have achieved a level of respect that allows that it is no longer a fledgling university, or a dissident one. This means it is troubled (and graced) with the problems of growth and expansion. But demands for results and fears of rocking the boat might be more a part of the picture than ever before. In the knowledge industries,

speed of change is no less remarkable than the obsolescence of forms of knowledge. Fashion is not only the provenance of mall boutiques. The Institute itself—along with many new programs—grew at a time when expansion was controversial. Our success depended on the good will and support of several Deans and administrators who had the time to be curious and open about new mandates. A chair named after J.S. Woodsworth and an institute with our mandate had to take risks in exploring controversial issues with different audiences.

Our programs have varied, and yet maintain a coherence that I am very proud of. All programs and events are not directly reported on here. Programs range from challenges to the Canadian welfare state in the context of social democracy and equality to recognition of human rights issues. One example is our recent support of an exhibition of John Humphrey's life and work on the birth of the declaration of human rights—Humphrey was the Canadian author of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights. From Chief Joe Gosnell's inspired representation of Aboriginal rights and the controversy over the Nisga'a treaty, to a one-day conference on the nuclear arsenals and arms threats between India and Pakistan at the Surrey Arts Centre—at which human rights speakers from Pakistan, India, and Canada spoke—the community and the Institute collaborated to bring a rights-based vision to the public. This particular event accompanied a curated exhibition of compelling photographs from India by Hari Sharma, professor emeritus in sociology. The connection to the history and cultures of Southeast Asia comes to SFU with the Institute's annual co-sponsorship of the Gandhi peace and alternatives to violence program. We have also sponsored or collaborated with other organizations in supporting rights-based initiatives; for example, the South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy and its speakers on diaspora and social justice. We have supported several programs that raised challenges to the exploitation of East Timor by the Indonesian state and military.

The humanities is a subject area, but it also studies methods about how we explore and represent modernity in artistic worlds. That is the fate of the humanities everywhere today—to be cross-cultural and to critique ethnocentrism and cultural monomania, yet to study classic texts and authors. Why? The end of the century has loudly proclaimed itself as harboring the end of just about everything and the beginning of the new. New urbanized audiences in Vancouver are asked to struggle with notions of the communal as well as its new-found identity in urban modernism—a topic at home in the humanities from the time of the polis to the various religious and utopian ideas that inform our Canadian culture. Cultures in transition will tend to resurrect ideas of community, and today the troubles of nation-state politics downloading services to the private and community sectors affect local traditions and choices. This is why it has been important for the Institute to participate in initiatives where museums and galleries are opening up avenues to new audiences and to support voluntarist initiatives. We have worked with the Vancouver Art Gallery, Presentation House in North Vancouver, Burnaby Art Gallery, Surrey Art Gallery, The Roundhouse in Yaletown, Britannia Community School, Britannia Community Services Centre, SPARC, and Simon Fraser’s continuing education programs under Mark Selman and Debbie Bell. The Institute has supported books on prison education published by New Star Books, and edited by Peter Murphy of the College of the Cariboo. We have supported the development of a Labor Studies Archive and have worked with Mark Leier in History and the Archives’ recent benefactor, Margaret Morgan of the Margaret and Lefty Morgan Endowment Fund, to further a labour and community education project that is close to the spirit of the Woodsworth legacy and the Institute’s programs in social justice.

The Institute is also an important university resource and has collaborated with and sought advice and assistance from departments and individuals from many disciplines: history, political

science, geography, communications, women's studies, psychology, sociology, and criminology.

A new and important venture was undertaken several years ago with the Knowledge Network. The Institute and the educational television station produced and aired six 30-minute programs entitled "Conflicting Publics." The interviews were with seven distinguished social theorists who have changed our understanding of what constitutes the idea of the "public" today—John O'Neill, Axel Honneth, Jean Elshtain, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Arne Naess, and George McRobie. They have been aired often on the Knowledge Network. The program concept was a collaboration with Ian Angus, lead interviewer and writer, me, and Roman Onufrijchuk of the Knowledge Network.

The mandate (and sensibility!) of the Institute's proximity to the J. S. Woodsworth Chair was recently tested by the controversy over the appointment of David Noble, social historian at York University, to the Chair. The controversy is symbolic of current controversies—symptomatic perhaps of the times—over the changing norms of the ideas of academic freedom.

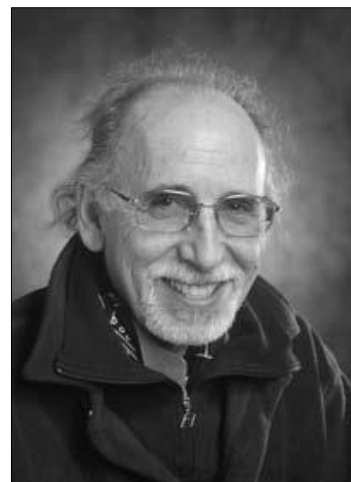
Professor Noble, who is well known nationally and internationally for his written and spirited public—and one should add humanities-based—criticism of the uses of technology for the "brave new world" of the Internet-boom, weathered criticism from various administrative bodies and faculty members after his appointment was recommended by the Humanities Department after a sanctioned search for a Chair. A second review was returned to the department, only to be rejected once again by the Dean of Arts and the University Appointments Committee. The controversy was so fraught with tangible implications for academic freedom and university governance that two outside reviews of the procedures were undertaken—one by the University President, and one, at the request of David Noble, by the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

Wherever one stands on this serious controversy—some see it as the intrusion of “global order” politics into the University’s right to initiate and support criticism without fear of offending segments of the public. Others see Professor Noble’s scholarship and his public persona as an issue about his “collegiality.” Issues of academic freedom have once more stirred awareness of how a university can handle difficult issues that arise over corporate identity and what constitutes the appropriate way for controversial humanities issues to be presented to the public. This may be the real issue today—that the university is not an ivory tower. It engages the public by acting as a social movement in a restless liberal society. However, if the society itself is searching for an identity that it may have lost, both may mirror each other’s wandering in the global wilderness. The coercive forces that limit or whittle away at autonomy are not always clearly known even to those of us who work here. Funding education, finding meaningful employment for humanities students, judging the confusions about the difference between training and education determine whether this is an enclave of, by, and for academics and students, or is an enclave of other social forces. One hopes it is a public resource that frames civic competence by describing fearlessly and openly how these pressures, interests, and forces work. The Noble case raises all of these issues and there have been other similar cases in Canada.

As I write, the violence of global warfare has superceded the many existing civil wars as well as continuing the old Cold War by other means. Paramount: the way the wealthy and powerful “West” faces the parts of the world that live by local and community logics, not only by free trade and old moneyed powers. The technological revolution, which affects ordinary people, legislators, and power-brokers who live in symbolic, ideological, and religious worlds, has made the world smaller, not larger, and at the same time more overwhelming. Not least is the inability of the rich world to convey and represent its “universal”—that is geopolitical and liberal—principles for

social justice, diversity and tolerance to premodern economies and cultures and, yes, to its own poor. The new “clash of cultures” (as Samuel Huntington names and describes it in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996) brings the ends of the earth right up to our doorsteps. Finally, as the shadows of a “New World Order” creep over us, what are the priorities for the humanities? Inner exile? Engagement? Cynicism? Retrenchment? Or engagement with the world of ideas-in-the-making? Who decides? In times when the whole picture is overwhelming one yearns for the facts and news that is not managed.

My colleague, Don Grayston—the Institute’s new and steadfastly committed Director, and his colleagues—are eminently qualified to help us think through these issues. I wish to thank my colleagues and friends for the opportunity over the years to be a public intellectual where one can say, without too much piety in a world that is full of pieties, that academic freedom is not just about being free to be an academic, but is the freedom to test the limits of academic life and to participate in the life of the wider community by distributing knowledge in what Hannah Arendt described as the *vita activa*. Put another way, the future of the world may well be about the “clash of cultures” but not knowing the implication of this idea may create the conditions for having no future at all.



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